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## Siraf and East Africa

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### Abstract

*When the great traveler and geographer, al-Masudi sailed to East Africa in AH 304 (916 CE), he did so on ship owned by a family of Siraf ship owners, living in the Mikan quarter of the city. He suggests that the voyage was common- place, although one of the most dangerous to be undertaken on the Indian Ocean. The most popular destination was the town of Qanbalu, where al-Masudi himself stayed and one of the few places with an Islamic population. He describes a complex society, supplying mostly ivory and some amber (or ambergris) into the Indian Ocean trading system.*

*Recent archaeological researches in East Africa have amplified our understanding of this trade. Coinciding with the revival of Siraf as an international trading center in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, we can note a significant increase in Gulf- imports on East African sites; the likelihood that Siraf was one of the major partners can be suggested from the range of ceramics and glass that is found including commonly unglazed storage jars that were being manufactured at Siraf itself.*

*These connections continue into the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, with remarkable concurrence in the assemblages on the African coast, with those found in the houses of the Sirafi merchants in Iran. We are also able, from recent excavations, to pinpoint the main areas of trade to the Lamu archipelago, northern Pemba (probably the island of Qanbalu) and Zanzibar. From these areas, long archaeological sequences have been obtained that show the massive scale of the international trade between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The paper will focus on the results from excavations from shanga and Manda , Mkumbuu and Tumbe , and Unguja Ukuu , Kizimkazi and Tumbatu ( where sirafi- style*



*kufic inscriptions have been found ) The paper will argue that the relationship between Siraf and East Africa was much more fluid than a simple trade in raw materials from the African coast. The evidence suggests an active network that involved the substantial movement of people (such as craftsmen, religious leaders) not just merchants, and a close connection that spanned artistic, religious and architectural activities. This can be seen for example in mosques and tomb architecture, in stone inscriptions, and in surviving customs and ceremonies. African-Iranian relations, through the port of Siraf, were complex and sustained over many centuries, and are only now being understood through archaeological investigations in east Africa and the full publication of the Siraf excavations.*

When the great traveller and geographer, al-Masudi sailed from East Africa to the Gulf in AH 304 (916 CE), he did so on a ship owned by a family of Sirafi shipowners, who were resident in the Mikan quarter of the city. He commented that the ‘people of Siraf’ make this voyage, and that this was his last voyage to East Africa of several during his career. He also commented that of all the voyages in the Indian Ocean, ‘I do not know of one more dangerous than that of the Zanj’ (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 14-16)

His destination was the island and town of Qanbalu. This place had a Muslim population and a royal family, although the rest of the East African coast was predominantly non-Muslim. His detailed ethnographic descriptions of the local inhabitants, the

record of Bantu words that were spoken suggests that he was an accurate and careful observer. He commented that the most common export was ivory, but also lists wild leopard skins, tortoise shell and ambergris (which seems to have been obtained from hunted whales). There is a brief notice of gold from southern Africa, but significantly not of slaves.

His account of the ivory trade is of particular interest. He describes local hunting methods, and how the tusks weigh fifty pounds or more. They usually go to Uman, and from there are 'sent to China and India'. He commented that Chinese required ivory palanquins, or litters, and in India for the handles of daggers and curved sword scabbards, as well as chessmen and gaming pieces. Ivory was also burnt in religious ceremonies. The scale of the ivory trade to India and China was such that 'if it were not so, ivory would be common in Muslim lands'.

Al-Masudi's account is a useful snapshot of relations between Siraf and East Africa at the beginning of the tenth century CE, but only provides one place name, that of Qanbalu, the location of which we will return to later. Other historical accounts fill in other details. For example Ibn Hawqal (c. 960 CE) states that the 'houses of Siraf are constructed in teak (*saj*) and other kinds of wood, which are imported from the land of the Zanj. This



passage has been much debated (Whitehouse 2001) but archaeological evidence suggests that mangrove poles were extensively used in tenth-century Sirafi houses, and these most likely came from East Africa, where the use of such poles are recorded from an early date (Horton 1996, 414). Another indicator of the closeness of the links between Siraf and East Africa comes from the tenth-century *Book of the Wonders of India* compiled by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar, and probably completed around 953 CE (Freeman-Grenville 1981) Buzurg was a sea-captain operating in the Indian Ocean, and collected most of his stories in the ports of Sohar and Siraf. The collection contains 136 stories of which 13 refer to East Africa. His narrative includes descriptions of a slaving expedition to East Africa, and the first detailed account of gold mining through adits into the hillside, in the land of Sofala in Southern Africa. His narrative is also important as it was the first to mention three additional place-names, as well as Qanbalu; Thabia, Ghailami Island and the Sea of Saifu.

### **East African Historical Sources**

How was Siraf viewed from East Africa? Unfortunately early sources from the region do not survive, or were never written. There are however a series of local histories and chronicles from the 16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as a strong oral tradition, than

can still be recorded relate various historical events (Pouwells 1987, 2000). Of particular importance are those accounts that link the founding of towns in East Africa by seven brothers, or six sons and the ruler of Shiraz (Prins 1967, Spear 2000). While Siraf is not mentioned directly, the geographical proximity between Siraf and Shiraz indicates the importance of the connection with this area of Fars.

The oldest surviving chronicle, *The Chronicle of the Kings of Kilwa*, was recorded as a Portuguese preçis by Joao de Barros and published in *Da Asia* in 1552 (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 89). A longer version of another chronicle written in Arabic, containing similar material, is known as the *History of Kilwa* and survives in a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 34-7). There is a third chronicle, written in ki-Swahili, that adds further details. All the versions provide a semi-mythical account of the founding of Kilwa, a town on the southern part of the East African coast, by merchant-princes from Shiraz. The Portuguese version relates how Ali, one of seven brothers, whose father was "Hocen" (Husain), and whose mother was an Abyssinian, embarked at Hormuz, and eventually arrived at Kilwa where he acquired the island from the local ruler in exchange for cloth. The Arabic version gives seven ships sailing from Shiraz, a sultan and his six sons. Each ship



stopped at different places and founded a town. Kilwa was established by Ali bin al-Husain, although his father, the ‘Sultan of Shiraz’ is remembered as Hasan bin-Ali. The local pagan ruler was named as Muli, and the new arrivals were met by a local Muslim, Muiri wa Bari. There was a mosque already on the island known as Kibala (i.e. a building with a Mihrab). Various dates are given for the settlement of Kilwa; the Chronicle gives around AH 400 (c. 1009 CE) while the History gives mid third century (c. 864 CE).

The Shirazi traditions are extremely widespread along the coast, not just in Kilwa, but in the region between Malindi and the Comoro islands. The list of ports given in the History of Kilwa is significant – they include Manda, Shanga, Yanbu (?), Mombasa, Pemba island, Kilwa and Anjouan – and run in a southerly direction. It is curious that the place of the supposed first landing in the Lamu archipelago, with the towns of Shanga and Manda, the Shirazi traditions are at their weakest. Non-Kilwa versions of the same myth provide quite different lists of towns, often with a more southerly focus as well as different names of the people involved.

There has been much debate about the historical significance of the Shirazi myth. At one level this is clearly a ‘foundation

myth', that reads in a very implausible way (Horton and Middleton 2000, Middleton 1992). The History of Kilwa gives the reason for the migration as a dream by the Sultan that he saw a rat with an iron snout gnawing the town walls of Shiraz, and predicted the ruin of the city. The account of the seizure of the island of Kilwa is full of structured principles and oppositions that can be read as a foundation charter to legitimize its control by a particular group. The last of consistency between names and places suggests that the myth was replayed in different towns and ruling dynasties. No trace of the migration, nor of the individuals can be found in the historiography of Shiraz itself.

Some archaeologists and historians have argued that behind the myth there was a genuine migration from Shiraz/Siraf, which is being remembered. The first modern interpretation suggested that Shirazi merchants settled the towns on the Benadir coast of southern Somalia, marrying into the local population, before moving down to the coast to Pemba, Zanzibar, Kilwa and the Comoro islands (Chittick 1965, 1977). The most ardent advocate of the Shirazi migration theory was Neville Chittick (1984), who in his excavations at Manda (the first 'town' in the list to be settled) found an extensive 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century trading port, including ceramics that were essentially similar to those excavated by Whitehouse at Siraf. In particular, quantities of





earthenware storage jars made in the kilns in the industrial quarter of Siraf formed a significant part of the total assemblage. He argued that merchants from Siraf established a colony at Manda in the ninth century. Some centuries later, and having taken local African wives, the descendants of these Sirafi/Shirazi merchants moved south. In his excavations at Kilwa, Chittick (1974, Horton et al, 1986) found copper and silver coins, with a series starting with coins of Ali bin al-Hasan, which he dates to c. 1200 CE (but which I have redated to c. 1000 CE) and identified with the founder of the Shirazi dynasty, which we have seen as actually Ali bin al-Husain. The historical date was seen as the start of a very long historical process, ending in the early 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century.

Few working in East Africa now accept this literal interpretation of the historical texts (Nurse and Spear 1985). The archaeological evidence suggests that the ports of the coast have their origins in the Iron Age communities of East Africa (Chami 1994). Careful studies of the ceramic sequences that have been excavated show a long development of occupation starting at least in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, and continuing until the present day. No evidence for actual colonies of Persian (or indeed Arab) merchants can be deduced from the archaeological evidence. This is also confirmed by modern historical linguistics that has

found very few Arabic and virtually no Persian loan words in reconstructions of early Swahili language (Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993). A modern reading of the Shirazi traditions is that they were formed as part of the conversion of the coastal communities of east Africa to Islam during the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and echo the commercial and religious links between Fars and the East African coast. They provide some valid dynastic information at local rulers, but are not a literal narrative of historical events, but myths or foundation charters for the southern Swahili settlements.

### **Archaeological Evidence**

Recent archaeological researches in East Africa have amplified our understanding of these connections, the religious changes were happening at the time, and the social context of local distance Indian Ocean trade.

Two major excavations have taken place in the Lamu archipelago, at the sites of Manda (Chittick 1984) and Shanga (Horton 1996). At present both sites date from the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century, although some radiocarbon dates from Manda might point to earlier occupation. The two sites lie less than 15 miles apart, and represent two competing ports on separate islands in the archipelago. Manda is the larger of the two sites (possibly



covering about 10 ha) in its early phases, with more substantial architecture, including stone sea walls, coral and brick-built buildings, might be residential or ceremonial in function. Manda is also richer in its imports of ceramics and glass, although this may be because the beach and trading areas were excavated (Horton 1984, 1986). Both sites have a strong focus in their imported pottery towards the Gulf, and in particular the ceramic assemblages from Siraf. While much is of types that have a general circulation (such as Sasanian-Islamic jars, white glazed wares and colour-splashed wares, and lustre wares) other types have a close Siraf connection. These include lead splashed wares and lead glazed polychromes, the so called 'early sgraffiato pottery', but also the unglazed storage jars. Three of the five main types of jar found can be directly attributed to the Siraf kilns (Horton 1996, 297), the most common being the pale green earthenware. These wares represented 25-30% of the imported pottery totals between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the import of this pottery ceased overnight. The impact of the earthquake at Siraf in 977 may have been the cause for this collapse in this trade – or at least the production of these storage jars.

Another connection is suggested in the Chinese ceramics found in the Lamu archipelago. While numerically rarer in East Africa

than in Siraf, nonetheless all the main types are found – Changsha painted stoneware, Olive green glazed ('Dusun') jars, Yue greenwares and Ding wares. These small pieces of Chinese pottery occur at around 5% of the total imported assemblage in these early levels, a rather higher proportion than at Siraf itself. Siraf was probably the main centre for the import of Chinese pottery in the ninth century, and it is remarkable that so many pieces find their way to East Africa.

We have no information about the religion of the inhabitants of Manda, but at Shanga Muslims were certainly present. Directly evidence for this comes from a series of mosques that were excavated below the Friday Mosque, constructed about 1000 CE. The first seven mosques were constructed entirely of timber, and spanned the late 8<sup>th</sup>-early 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. They were rectangular in plan, and a particular feature was the inclusion of a southern room beyond the prayer hall, which acted as outer room, through which the prayer hall was entered. The capacity of these timber mosques was limited to around 25 worshippers, and each mosque had a life of around 30 years, before it was replaced. The first stone mosque, dating to early 10<sup>th</sup> century, retained the same basic plan, with its southern room. The prayer hall changed its shape to being square, and this may reflect Gulf, and specifically Siraf influence where the



smaller mosque have similar square prayer halls, as well as annexes. Another link is the use of the staircase minaret, also found in Shanga example as well as at Siraf. When the 10<sup>th</sup> century stone mosque at Shanga was replaced in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the prayer hall reverted to being rectangular in shape.

An important issue is who were these Shanga Muslims. Various theories have been postulated – the mosques were for example for visiting merchants, and not the local inhabitants. However I am convinced that they were local converts to Islam, and the main evidence comes from a series of miniscule silver coins (Brown 1992, 1993, 1996). These were locally minted, and give the name of two local rulers Muhammed and Abdullah, dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They have Islamic styling, although not part of an official issue of the Caliphate, and point at least to a Muslim royal family in the archipelago. The coins are themselves simple, tiny in weight (less than 0.1g) and contain very little information, and point to a production using dirhams as the silver source. The mosques have a capacity of about 25, that may well have been adequate for a small settlement of about 250 people.

The sites in the Lamu archipelago fit closely the description of Qanbalu, provided by al-Masudi. Here there are two sites with

very close trading links with the Gulf, and specifically Siraf, as well as direct evidence for an elite Muslim population living at Shanga at the time of his visit. He even tells of a historical tradition, that places the establishment of Qanbalu, around the time of the changeover between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, that is c. 750 CE, precisely when Shanga at least is founded on archaeological evidence.

Needless to say, there has been considerable debate on the location of Qanbalu, and if al-Masudi is correct, the main port for trade with Siraf and the Gulf in general during the 9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Al-Jahiz, writing in the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, identified the town as the main centre of the trade in Zanj slaves, that were used to drain the swamps of the Shatt al-Arab, and were involved in the notorious Zanj revolt ((869-883 CE). It is likely that the export of Zanj slaves collapsed in the aftermath of the revolt, and this may explain al-Mas'udi's silence on the trade.

The favoured location for Qanbalu has for many years been the island of Pemba (Chittick 1977). Again recent excavations are now throwing considerable new light on this central part of the East African coast and in particular the two islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. This particular pairing seems to be what al-Jahiz is



referring to, when he notes the two islands of Qanbalu and Lanjuya, the latter clearly being Unguja, the historic name of Zanzibar island. The main port is probably the site of Unguja Ukuu, which has recently been excavated and published (Juma 2004), and which contains similar assemblages to Manda and Shanga. Although the proportion of Siraf jars is a little lower than in the northern ports, it is rich in Sasanian-Islamic pottery, and Chinese imports. As with Manda, it is the quantities of imported ceramic that impresses, and show the scale of commercial connection with the Gulf in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unlike Shanga and Manda, Unguja Ukuu is abandoned in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and one wonders whether its failure was linked to the ending of the Zanj slave trade. The settlement may have moved to Kizimkazi, where there is a famous early mosque with the elaborate Kufic inscription and mihrab, dated AH 500 /1107 CE, that uses local coral, but is clearly in the same style as the Kufic school of carving based in Siraf. Recently, a second mihrab, with similar Kufic has been excavated on the island of Tumbatu, off the north coast of Zanzibar (Horton forthcoming).

The Qanbalu identification with Pemba is indicated by the name is given to a settlement on the island at Yakut in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, which can be identified with the archaeological site of Ras Mkumbuu, a name phonetically related to Qanbalu. He also

mentions another town on the island, that can be identified as the site of Mtambwe Mkuu.

Archaeological evidence however does not support the direct identification of either Ras Mkumbuu or Mtambwe Mkuu as Qanbalu. Mkumbuu has an 10<sup>th</sup> century timber mosque, and a large Muslim population by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but not convincing evidence for settlement before 950 CE, and it is probably the inhabitants moved there from somewhere else, possibly bringing their place name with them. Mtambwe Mkuu is another important 11<sup>th</sup> century site, and excavations have located a series of pits containing good assemblages of mid 10<sup>th</sup> century material, but nothing earlier. However an ongoing project in Northern Pemba, directed by Jeff Fleisher and Adria LaViolette (1997) has located the site of Tumbe / Chwaka, close to an excellent harbour that faces northwards into the Indian Ocean. Fleisher's survey (2002) has suggested that northern Pemba was heavily settled in the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that Tumbe itself covered some 30 ha, the largest known early site in East Africa. Huge quantities of local pottery and daub have been found here, as well as post hole buildings. The site begins in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but seems to shift to nearby Chwaka in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century when the settlement surrounds a small stone mosque.





Tumbe might be the town of Qanbalu, and the excavations have not yet been completed, let alone fully analysed. However, preliminary indicators are that it is simply not 'rich' enough to fit the descriptions of already known major trading sites, such as Shanga, Manda and Unguja Ukuu. Imports are around 1-2% (as opposed to 5% at Shanga, and possibly higher at Manda), while the range of finds is much more limited. No Chinese imports have yet been found. The very many bead grinders, which employ discarded sherds, are all made from local ceramics, whereas at Shanga and Manda the much harder Sirafi jars are the preferred material. Tumbe looks like a large agricultural and manufacturing settlement, in contact with the Indian Ocean trading networks, but not the main port of trade.

### **Siraf and East Africa**

Why was East Africa so important to the Sirafi merchants? As we have seen, there was a close and sustained link in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and they were prepared to trade items such as their valuable Chinese pottery for the African commodities. Clearly there were materials such as timber that were important, because they were scarce in the Gulf. Slaves seem also to have been important, although the Sirafi merchants do not seem to have been so involved in the Zanj slave trade. The trade in such

bulky commodities seems to indicate the voyage was less dangerous and more routine than the historical sources suggest.

However, it is also clear that East Africa was able to supply a range of high value, low bulk precious commodities that were not available elsewhere. These include ivory, tortoise shell, wild animal skins and ambergris. Gold, iron and copper may also have been important exports by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Although there is no direct evidence that rock crystal was exported to the Gulf (by the 10<sup>th</sup> century it was certainly being sent however to Egypt), this may also have been important item. These precious commodities made a major contribution to the artistic cultures of the Abbasid caliphate.

However, it is also interesting to note that many of these precious items did not remain in the Middle East. They were important trade goods in their own right, to obtain other materials from far-flung areas. Al-Masudi makes this clear in his description of the ivory trade; relatively little remained behind - most was traded onto India and China. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the importance of East Africa to the Sirafi merchants - that they had supplies of ivory and other precious and exotic African commodities with which to obtain the famous Chinese ceramics, silks and lacquerwoods. Control over



the supply of the African items enabled them to enjoy for a period a significant competitive advantage over merchants from other regions, and this, together with their incredible nautical prowess, was the key to the very long distance trading expeditions for which they were most famous.

While Siraf continued to exist as a port in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the archaeological evidence from East Africa indicates that other merchants were now in open competition for these precious commodities. These included Fatimid-controlled trade with southern Arabia and the Red Sea, Indian merchants and craftsmen, mostly from north west India, and south India and possibly even Indonesians operating a southern route via Madagascar. At the same time, the emergence of the key Port-cities at the mouth of the Gulf - Hormouz and Kish – were able to integrate the African trade more directly into the routes between India, Southern Arabia and the Red Sea. East African exotic commodities continued to be in high demand and new trade alliances were formed that ensured the continued prosperity of the ports involved.

However, in this reconstruction, the “Siraf” period of intense contact with East Africa lasted less than 200 years, between c. 800-1000 CE. The Shirazi traditions must have originated

during this period, closely coinciding with the flourishing of Buyid Shiraz, 965-1055 CE, with which they seem to have been modelled on. It is a testimony to the depth and importance of the trade between the two regions, that such traditions are still recalled and retold a thousand years later.

The relationship between Siraf and East Africa was much more fluid than a simple trade in raw materials from the African coast. The evidence suggests an active network that involved the substantial movement of people (such as craftsmen, religious leaders) not just merchants, and a close connection that spanned artistic, religious and architectural activities. This can be seen for example in mosques and tomb architecture, in stone inscriptions, and in surviving customs and ceremonies. African – Iranian relations, through the port of Siraf, were complex and sustained over many centuries, and are only now being understood through archaeological investigations in East Africa and the full publication of the Siraf excavations.

### **Biographical Details.**

Dr Mark Horton is Reader in Archaeology and Head of Department at the University of Bristol, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. He has conducted excavations in East Africa since 1980, and has published *Shanga, the*



*Archaeology of an Early Muslim Trading Centre* (British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996), and *The Swahili* (Blackwells, People of Africa 2000) as well as numerous articles on the history and archaeology of East Africa. He is preparing a major monograph on the archaeology of Zanzibar and most recently conducted research on northern Pemba Island in 2004.

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